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NR = MC²: Rossellini, “Neo-realism,” and Croce

by Tag Gallagher

Abstract Mistaken notions of neo-realism as a leftwing ideology have led to Rossellini's being considered marginal to it. But the term's origins are in French phenomenology rather than Italian Marxism. Rossellini, however, has roots in neither camp but in Croce. And both via Croce and in agreement with phenomenology, Rossellini's neo-realism on one hand rejects ideology as the great enemy of human progress and on the other hand seeks to liberate humanity by making ideology the chief object of study.

The origins of “neo-realism”—of both the term and the cinematic movement—are commonly traced back to 1943 when Mario Serandrei called *OSSESSIONE* “neo-realist,” when Umberto Barbaro wrote an article in *Film*, and when the young men at *Cinema* were theorizing about the sort of films they thought should be made.¹ All of these men were aligned with the Communist Party and shared the belief that cinema's future was indicated by left-wing humanism as found in the Party, by literature (Verga principally), and by French film (Renoir, Carné, Duvivier).

So successfully did the *Cinema* group propagate this explanation of neo-realism (chiefly through the essays of Cesare Zavattini composed in the mid 1950s) that it has become the basis for defining neo-realism in almost all textbooks. And in 1978 Lino Micciché, following Pio Baldelli's landmark study of Rossellini,² was able to write: “It turns out that the author of the first neo-realist film (*ROMA CITTÀ APERTA* [*OPEN CITY*, 1945]) and of one of the

masterworks of neo-realism (*PAISÀ* [1946]), far from being at the center of that neo-realist ‘ideology’ of which he was for three years considered the symbol par excellence, had actually—despite appearances—been moving collaterally to it or, better, in a coincidence that did not go beyond the humanism of the initial postwar period. . . . [Neo-realism] was not an aesthetics [but] an ‘ethics of an aesthetics.’ It was the answer of a new generation of filmmakers to Vittorini's question: ‘Shall we ever have a culture capable of protecting people against suffering instead of just comforting them?’ ”³

Is this true? Should Rossellini be drummed out of the neo-realist ranks? Granted that Rossellini's art had little to do with Verga, *Cinema*, literary realism, and Marxist socialism, and was not in solidarity with the Left's push for immediate practical reform. But was he uncommitted toward constructing a better society? Is this charge justified? I think not. And what of the Left's claim to proprietorship of “neo-realist ideology”? Is this justified? I think not. Quite the contrary, if we can speak at all of a “neo-realist ideology,” it is Rossellini who is at its center, and the tendentious Left that is peripheral to it.

THE FRENCH DID IT.

The first problem with the Left's title to “neo-realism” is that *Cinema* did not use the word at all, while Barbaro and Serandrei employed it not to signal a new *Italian* cinema but to describe certain old *French* films made by Renoir, Carné, and Duvivier. More importantly, after using the word (just twice) in 1943, they did not use it again until late 1948. They were not, then, the ones to apply it—or even to speak

much about “reality”—in reference to ROMA CITTÀ APERTA, DEUTSCHLAND IM JAHRE NULL [GERMANY YEAR ZERO: Rossellini 1947], SCIUSCIÀ [SHOESHINE: De Sica 1946], IL SOLE SORGE ANCORA [Vergano 1946], VIVERE IN PACE [Zampa 1946], etc. They had dreamed of a new Italian cinema; but, when it appeared, they did not acknowledge it, for it was quite different from the mixture of Verga, Carné, and Marx they had had in mind.

The term “neo-realist,” in point of fact, was not used at all during the period most properly defined as neo-realist—the 1944–48 period of postwar solidarity.⁴ And when the word at last does appear, in the May 1948 issue of *La Revue du Cinéma* and the June 1948 issue of *Bianco e Nero*, not only have all the monuments of neo-realism already been made (or, like LADRI DI BICICLETTA [BICYCLE THIEVES: De Sica 1948] and LA TERRA TREMA [Visconti 1948], been started), and not only has postwar solidarity already come to an end with the Cold-War rupture marked by the 18 April 1948 elections, but “neo-realism” has been coined afresh by French Catholics and has next to nothing to do with pre-war usages.

“We Catholic critics have invented the term ‘neo-realist school of cinema,’ ” wrote the Dominican Felix A. Morlion in that June 1948 number of *Bianco e Nero*.⁵ And he went on to define neo-realism as being (1) “a magic window that opens out onto the ‘real,’ ” and (2) the attitude with which we look out that window. “As a foreigner who discovered Italy after working in thirty countries of Europe, America, and Africa, it is only here that I have regained my optimism about Western culture. In Italy, intelligence, imagination, and sensitivity are immensely creative because they are linked to a simple and rich human tradition, the fruit of twenty centuries of heroism and sacrifice: the Christian tradition. . . . In Italian art, as in the Italian mind, there is not yet a division between the left and the right, or to put it better, between materialism and the spiritual. Human reality is a spiritual reality, even for the man who is not a disciplined church-goer.” And, added Morlion, specifically denying the relation between neo-realism and the French films celebrated by the Left tradition, “that is why the Italian cinema will not have its LA BÊTE HUMAINE, QUAI DES BRUMES, or its LE JOUR SE LÈVE [Renoir 1938, Carné 1938, and Carné 1939].”⁶

“Neo-realism,” then, as a concept, did not exist until after neo-realism as a creative movement was dead. And the term, far from emerging out of specifically Italian traditions, was, in fact, an attempt to im-

pose a foreign, and in many ways alien, body of thought onto an Italian artifact. This dual nationality accounts for our difficulty in defining it. Its dual ideology makes matters worse. For Morlion, in identifying neo-realism as a proclamation of “the deep, dynamic and truly human reality” that transcends differences between left and right—between Marx and Christ—was enunciating an attitude that was virtually dead by the time his article made it into print. All subsequent discussions of neo-realism were hopelessly politicized, and the term itself was pressed into the service of polemical ideology.⁷ But the dream of a transcendent humanism—although a heretical, dangerous, and even criminal posture midst the anathema-hurlings of the Cold War years—survived and led to Vatican II. And it subsisted particularly in Rossellini who, befriending Morlion and seeking his advice during STROMBOLI TERRA DI DIO [1949] and FRANCESCO GIULLARE DI DIO [1950], held to it always, sought (in EUROPE ’51, for example) to apply it to normal daily existence, and was at the end of his life planning a film on Marx’s Christian qualities after making another showing Christ’s Marxist ones.

But Morlion’s “neo-realism” is French. Even its most Italian ingredient, its humanism, is rooted less in the Italian Resistance than in the Catholic Marxism of 30s’ France, while the “magic window that opens out onto the ‘real’ ” reflects the existentialism and phenomenology that, taking off from Bergson’s revolt against positivism, flowered in Merleau-Ponty, Jacques Maritain, the review *Esprit*, André Bazin, and, eventually, *Cahiers du Cinéma*.⁸ Life is *experience*, they said, and not reducible to analysis. Aesthetic, spiritual, political, and sociological matters are all mixed together, all interdependent.

But existentialism and phenomenology, like sociology and Marxism, were movements of which Italy, during the Fascist decades, had been largely innocent. The first reviews of ROMA CITTÀ APERTA and PAISÀ demonstrate this. What the Italians talk about are traditional literary values: crudeness, melodrama, and *style*; film for them, it is clear, had always an ideological purpose: to provide a model, an explanation, a sermon. But what the French talk about is *reality*: film is a record, an imprint, a witness; only secondarily might it be ideological. For, in the wake of World War II, what the Italians sought was an ideology, a workable mindset toward history, and practical solutions to material problems—whereas what the French sought was valid sensation, a feeling of the earth beneath their feet.

But now a fusion occurs, at least on the level of rhetoric. As Rossellini’s films are nursed carefully



Figure 1. ROMA CITTÀ APERTA (Roberto Rossellini, 1945).

through their initial promotions back and forth between Italy and France, Italian critiques come more and more to reflect the French orientation. In between PAISÀ's initial reception at Venice in September 1946 and its commercial openings in Milan that December and Rome the following March, French reactions to it and ROMA CITTÀ APERTA drift into Italy and impregnate Italian film criticism with existentialism and phenomenology. Rossellini himself, not slow to recognize a good thing, picks up catch phrases in Paris and talks about how he lets "things speak for themselves," "shows" rather than "demonstrates," and leaves the spectator "free" to draw his own conclusions. And from Bazin, Amédée Ayfre, and *Cahiers*, as well as from their Italian disciples, some of the most inspired and—apparently—symbiotic criticism in the history of film begins to pour forth.

Yet ultimately it must be conceded that Morlion, whatever his title to the term "neo-realism" has no more right to dictate its definition than has the Left. Phenomenology and existentialism attempted, just as

did workingclass realism, to impose upon films already made attitudes that, although they pre-existed those films, had not motivated the films themselves. The contradiction between theory and fact, between what "neo-realism" decreed the films were supposed to be and what they actually were, was solved by the Left by expelling Rossellini from the neo-realist canon, and by the phenomenologists by increasingly intellectualized rhetoric. Yet Rossellini's cinema was never so styleless, objective, and heuristic as Bazin and Ayfre claimed. And while phenomenology's merits as an approach for watching movies—where we postpone analysis and emphasize experience—cannot be exaggerated, its feasibility for making movies—when analysis must precede action—is problematic. Rossellini tried, of course. He was close to being a "Bergsonian" filmmaker by temperament anyhow, with, in addition, a chameleon-like capacity to be absorbed in whomever and whatever was around him. Particularly in DEUTSCHLAND IM JAHRE NULL, his exposure to French ideas seems to have encouraged him to reject pre-production altogether and to rely

almost entirely on his emotionalized instinct at the moment of shooting.⁹

L'UOMO DI CROCE.

But this film aside, Rossellini's "neo-realism"—such as "The Po" in PAISAN—can no more have its sources in French thought than in Verga and Marx. Where, then, are the attitudes that did influence him?¹⁰

They are to be found, I think, in Benedetto Croce, a source hitherto ignored in discussions of neo-realism.¹¹

It has been objected that Rossellini, like many Italians, was almost constitutionally anti-philosophical: physically sure of the particular realities around him but impatient with intellectual abstractions. A Frenchman's abstractions try to concretize theory; an Italian's struggle to theorize the concrete. What Rossellini picked up about existentialism, phenomenology, Marxism, and so on, was by word of mouth. His understanding rarely went beyond the slogans and clichés of casual conversation.

But an Italian of Rossellini's generation no more had to be a philosopher to absorb the essential attitudes of Croceanism than he had to be a priest to absorb Catholicism. Italy was awash in Croce, so were his teachers at school, his piano teacher at home, and the members of his father's *cenacolo*, in whose weekly discussions he participated from age thirteen. Croce, a Hegelian philosopher, historian, and literary critic, dominated Italian thought as no one had for centuries. His attacks on both Marxism and the pedestrian ideas of the ruling class marked him as the leader of the new liberalism. He viewed history, furthermore, not as theory and abstraction but as direct experience of individuals—an approach perfectly suited to someone as physical and sensual as Rossellini.

The determining of historical facts, said Croce, is not a science but an art, a task not merely of analysis but of intuition, a matter less of concepts than of direct experience. It is not sufficient for an historian to study documents and artifacts; he must *relive* the past and integrate it into his own consciousness. In this way, art and imagination will bring us closer to reality, and the heroic virtues of the past will be renewed in us.¹²

Is not this the essence of Rossellini's neo-realism—to relive the past in order to understand it? "I could have made ROMA CITTÀ APERTA like propaganda, against everything," he said. "I tried not to. I tried to explore and understand, because I had the feeling that we were all responsible for what hap-

pened, all of us. Now, how to solve that problem?¹³ The effort I made . . . was to achieve understanding of events in which I had been immersed, by which I had been shaken. It was the exploration not only of historic facts, but really of attitudes, of behavior that that certain atmosphere, that that certain historical situation had determined.¹⁴ The language, the style of neo-realism are here: it's the result of a moral position, of looking critically at the obvious."¹⁵

This attitude toward history was unique with Rossellini in film. It's what's novel about OPEN CITY. Many films had told history, or used it as a background to explore ideas and characters, or to propagate ideas. But it is hard to think of one that historicized events to relive them, to understand them. Renoir's LA MARSEILLAISE (1938), for example, is Crocean in that it constantly implies analogies between populist causes during the French Revolution and Popular Front crises in 1938. But the film's style is unceasingly presentational; it seeks to demonstrate a thesis, not to inquire into an event.

Rossellini's obsession with history increased, becoming a need to relive the entire course of mankind's chronicle. Critics have judged him naive for this, scorning what they took to be his assumptions that he could know the past and recreate it with accuracy. And, as if to confirm their scorn, his films commit egregious errors in costuming, setting, interpretation, and, above all, omission.

But Rossellini and his critics are talking about different things. At the root of the problem is neither the *degree* of accuracy nor the *degree* of objectivity.¹⁶ History for Rossellini and Croce was never a positivist end-in-itself; it was never a mere "chronicling" of events. Croce, of course, was infinitely more precise than Rossellini, but he viewed getting facts right as a secondary, not the primary, operation of history. To collect, analyze, and classify is to make a "chronicle." History is quite different: the apprehending of something's or someone's individuality by thinking oneself into it and making its life one's own. History is not theoretical, not a *science* searching for *general* concepts. History is aesthetic fact, an *art* intuiting *individuality*. "History," said Croce, "does not seek for laws nor form concepts; it employs neither induction nor deduction; it is directed toward telling, not toward demonstrating; it does not construct universals and abstraction, but posits intuitions. The this and here."¹⁷ "I don't," said Rossellini, "want to recount what I think [about the past]. I try to reconstruct the emotion that I had while learning the thing."¹⁸ The aim of history is less to recreate the past in its exact specificity than to integrate it into present consciousness.

Similarly we are apt to misunderstand Rossellini when he defines neo-realism as "looking critically." We may think he is talking about an unbiased examination of objective facts, but instead he is referring to the camera as a tool in inquiry. He never spoke of the camera as Bazin did, as a means of recording; for him it was a "microscope,"¹⁹ "an instrument of torture,"²⁰ an aggressive rather than passive machine. No filmmaker ever used it as he did. He does not "present." He does not allow events to speak for themselves. Instead he perpetually attacks them, moving in and out, trying to get closer to this or that. Ophüls is always moving, too; but his motions "present" his events and become in turn the rhythms of the film. Rossellini's camera, in contrast, does not comment or analyze; indeed it seldom expresses, narrates, or even follows an event. Instead, it inquires; instead, it perpetually intrudes *into* an event.

And like Croce, it inquires with a purpose: "crit-

ical" does not mean "open-minded." History is the story of liberty emerging, as it was for Croce (and Augustine, Hegel, and Marx). Both men celebrate progress. Rossellini's theme is not, as Brunello Rondi maintained, "the despair of history," but the exact opposite: "I want my cinema to be one of faith, of hope, of love . . . , an appeal to humanity."²¹ Even when Don Pietro is executed in *ROMA CITTÀ APERTA*, even when the partisans are dumped into the Po in *PAISÀ*, and even when Edmund kills himself in *DEUTSCHLAND IM JAHRE NULL*, the message, rather than being nihilist, is the inevitable triumph of freedom—which makes their deaths all the more individually tragic.

BUT WHAT IS REAL?

As with Croce, Rossellini's emphasis on consciousness—on reconstructing "the emotions I had while

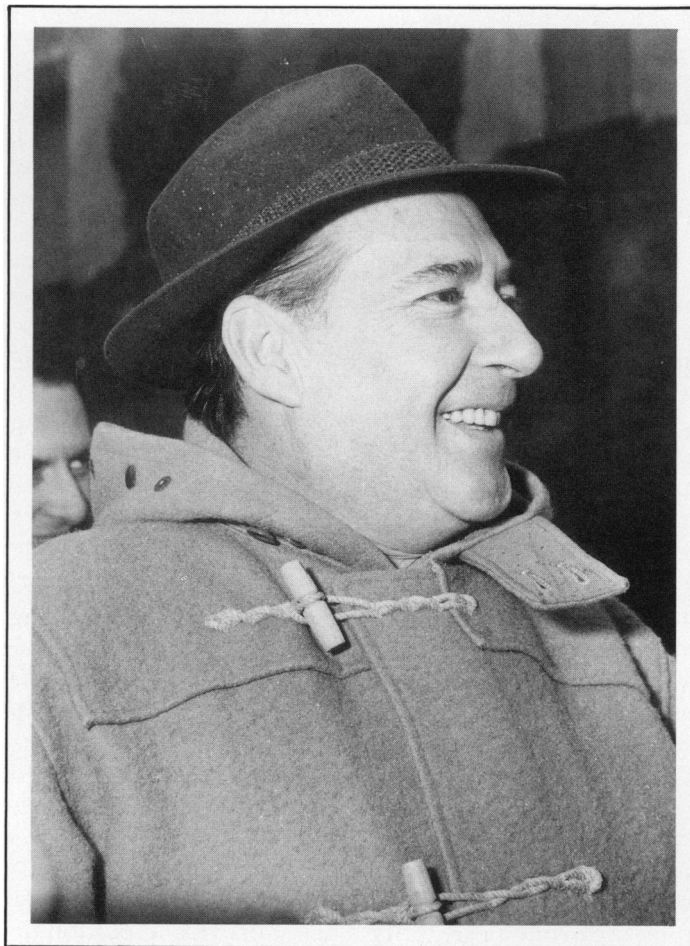


Figure 2. Roberto Rossellini (1906–1977). Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.



Figure 3. Benedetto Croce (1866–1952). Courtesy of Paolo Cherchi Usai.

learning” and on integrating the past into present consciousness—is both his strength and weakness. For ultimately, history, and therefore “reality,” becomes a matter not of objective facts but of the historian’s morality and commitment to society. “To give anything its true value means to have understood its authentic and universal meaning,” said our disciple of Croce. “There are those who still think of neo-realism as something external, as going out into the open air, as a contemplation of misery and suffering. [Rossellini mocked this notion in *LA MACCHINA AMMAZZACATTIVI*.] For me, realism is nothing other than the artistic form of truth. . . . It does not remain on the surface, but seeks out the most subtle aspects of the soul.²² My personal ‘neo-realism’ is nothing else but a moral position.”²³

The reality of Rossellini’s neo-realism, then, is not external! Just as for Croce, reality—the world outside of us—is unknowable, approachable only through our imagination. Ideas are neo-realism’s reality.²⁴

The notion that only ideas are knowable and that

the world is beyond our ken has been a basic postulate of thought since Plato. But since the Industrial Revolution, it has ceased to be a normal way of thinking and has come instead to seem arcane everywhere in the western world except, till recently, in Italy. There, where the Church had always insisted on the primacy of ideas, where the Copernican revolution and most innovative thought was suppressed from the sixteenth century onward, where the Enlightenment never came, and where contesting political ideologies ravaged for centuries, ideological “rhetoric” assumed the function that “truth” fills in more empirical lands. Whereas a news story in America, for example, would get reported in much the same way in all the papers and on television and radio, in Italy, up until a few years ago, the story would become a dozen different stories in a dozen different newspapers reflecting a dozen different party ideologies. Paradoxically, it is because each Italian was so individually convinced of the validity of his “reality” that reaching *any* consensus became impossible without the mediation of an ideology. But ideology, if at first an instrument for communication and social solidarity, quickly became an institution substituting for the world itself. And then “reality” did not exist, not as it did for the “naive” Americans, only views and interpretations. And the cart became the horse: in America, reality determined ideas; in Italy, ideas determined reality.²⁵ Rhetoric and will power can transform reality, said the Fascists. And even Marxism, in Gramsci’s hands, ceased being materialist: since the world exists only in our imagination, he proclaimed, we are free to make of it anything we choose.

But rhetoric encouraged cynicism. So often it proved false and hypocritical, so seldom it corresponded to experience. Nothing was sure, everything was doubtable. There were no moral absolutes, no sure *raisons d’être*, that either Marxism or Croce could provide: only the doubling back to the heroic responsibility of each human being to create his own world. Into this gap stepped the dogmatists: the Church, the Fascists, the Stalinists. But no amount of dogma could overcome the fact that Italy was suffering from a “reality” crisis.

And thus neo-realism held out hope. Bazin was saying that cinema provided an “imprint” of reality, Morlion was calling it “a magic window that opens out onto the real.” Might not neo-realism, especially in 1945 at the moment of Italy’s greatest national need, provide a solution to the crisis? Or would we go on and on as in Pirandello, where each of us has his own logic, conflicting realities never meet, and we argue eternally in limbo?

"YOU CAN REVISE THE WHOLE CONCEPTION OF THE UNIVERSE."

Rossellini was no philosopher. But, raised a Crocean, he accepted the necessity of rejecting all rhetoric and every ideology and of searching for "the artistic form of truth." "My films had a very specific purpose," he said. "They wanted to offer documents on a very specific moment and to allow a balance-sheet to be drawn up so that, intimately within each person, the consequences could be perceived. It was a moral position in face of facts. But a confusion set in as soon as these films appeared. People called them social revolt. They concentrated entirely on this notion and soon turned the films into political events [*réalités politiques*]." ²⁶

Rossellini, then, rejected the notion that his films had ideological intent. Hence he rejected any notion of a neo-realist ideology. Hence the antithesis between his notion of neo-realism and that promoted by Micciché (and generally understood in Britain and the U.S. as constituting neo-realism) is absolute. The *misconception* of neo-realism is rooted in the misconception of history. The Germans and English, though they knew history was not a science, went on calling it a science anyway, which invited confusion with natural science, and thus with naturalism, so that history, rather than intuition of individuality, became an attempt to formulate *laws* that would ex-

plain how human conduct is determined. This was an approach pleasing to Marxists and to working-class movements, but absolutely abhorrent to a Rossellini, who refused to shed individual responsibility and believed in the freedom of individual fulfillment as the indispensable basis of human progress. (He had planned to argue for a similar, rather than a positivist, interpretation of Marx in the film he did not live to make.) For Rossellini, as for Croce, theories of any sort are merely a subordinate element in history: all reality is history and all knowledge is historical knowledge. Thus Rossellini wanted to *destroy* ideology, he wanted to give reality back to the people, and thus to set them free. ²⁷

Thus, ideology is the subject, not the method, of Rossellini's neo-realism. Rather than the *petits faits vrais* of daily life so beloved by Zavattini, Rossellini's "documents" are the spheres of ideology that never appear at all in Zavattini. ²⁸ Virtually all of Rossellini's films are about people who, if they are not being victimized by ideology, are trying to impose ideologies of their own. He was concerned with Francis of Assisi, for example, because, he said, "St. Francis was born at a moment when the ideal of love, until then only erotic, became detached from any sort of eroticism. It was a profound turning point promoting a vast view, and to have that view one must put oneself in a very humble position. It's no longer a question of conquest but of identification. And St. Francis



Figure 4. During the filming of *PAISAN* (1946). Left to right: Vittorio De Sica, Maria Mercader, Roberto Rossellini, Maria Michi, Federico Fellini. Author's collection.

summed up all that, so he called himself a jester, a clown, a juggler, because he wanted to mock all sorts of pride. Because the main point was his meaning: that from a very humble position you can face everything and you can revise the whole conception of the universe."²⁹ And even more blatantly Rossellini's Louis XIV, Saint Paul (ATTI DEGLI APOSTOLI), Christ, Nazis and Communists, Pascal, Descartes, Cosimo dei Medici, Alberti, Augustine, Socrates, and Garibaldi are all trying to change the world according to their own, new ideas. INDIA MATRI BHUMI perhaps envisions a world where ideas are in harmony with nature. But Italians, in PAISAN, suffer in every episode from ideas others try to impose on them; Irene, in EUROPE '51, flees into an asylum to escape ideologies; and Edmund, in DEUTSCHLAND IM JAHRE NULL, kills himself to escape ideology. Even marital problems are perceived as rooted in "ideologies": public ones in VANINA VANINI, and private ones in VOYAGE IN ITALY—if one may use the word in that sense. Rossellini's description of BLAISE PASCAL—"an investigation of man's reasons in confrontation with society, faith, and history"—applies to all his work. "Ultimately the problem is always the same, that of freeing ourselves from all the superstructures, from our emotions and interests, to find the detachment sufficient to observe things. This is the point . . . : to rationalize our method of observation."³⁰

It must have been frustrating to someone of Rossellini's ilk, whose relations with people and things were fundamentally sensual and not at all abstract, that, try as he might, he could not get beyond the locked cosmos of ideas. He tried to be more specific, he redoubled his efforts to "demolish my ignorance," he filled his films more and more with little physical facts. To his obsessions with history and religion was added an obsession with science, with microbes and atoms (an uncompleted film called SCIENCE). It was an effort to escape theory, it was an effort to get outside himself, to restore primacy of experience over theory, to restore reality by destroying ideology: it was above all an effort to be *useful*. All theories, concepts, and ideologies—all *science*, in short—impose a layer of mystification between us and the world. But by individuating a phenomenon—by showing actual cells or by showing Socrates in his actual time and place—science and theory are demystified and things themselves become clear.³¹

But even in science, he discovered, our mind constitutes our knowledge. Yet the world of man is sufficient, insisted Croce, and nothing more is needed than the freedom and dedication of each of us. And Rossellini believed this, or wanted to, and always he is

searching out evidence of history's eventual triumph. But faced with the sorrows and mysteries of life, he himself, like almost all his characters, instinctively sought answers in God. And yet Rossellini believed he did not believe, although in no other filmmaker is the reality of religious faith so awesomely persistent a theme.

His oeuvre is structured on this dialectic of humanism and mysticism. On one hand, there is Croce's onerous responsibility to create our world and shoulder our doubts; on the other, the insufficiency of man and his ideas and the hope that some fuller "reality," that God, exists. In this search for truth, Rossellini's life became an extraordinary, marvelous adventure. ●

ADVICE TO FILM STUDENTS, 1970

The cinema I'm talking about isn't the cinema still seen and celebrated in movie theaters. That type of cinema, for me, is a dead cinema, a cinema made of deliria, narcissism, intellectualism, a cinema only good for getting people to exclaim to the directors, "O how wonderful you are!" Well, I want to employ all the years left me to throw shit on this cinema.

So what do we do? We make a cinema placed at the service of usefulness. Useful obviously for others, not for oneself!

What's useful for man before everything else? Knowledge. And making cinema whose object is the diffusion of knowledge means doing research . . . I don't like to be known as a director. My principal metier is that of trying to be a man: a curious man, a man fascinated by the history of ideas, by science, by history. I am a responsible man, responsible and conscious of living in a world full of problems, of dramatic problems. What kind of man would I be if I didn't occupy myself with the problems of the world?"

Quoted in Beppo Cino, "Il Cinema?
Un mestiere da imbecilli!"

Filmcritica 374–75 (May 1987): 231

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Serandrei, when he saw OSSESSION's rushes in 1943, wrote Visconti a letter saying, "I don't know how one could define this sort of cinema if not with the name 'neo-realistic.'" (Franca Faldini & Goffredo Fofi, *L'avventurosa storia del cinema italiano, 1935–1959* [Milan: Feltrinelli, 1979], 67).
- Barbaro's essay, "Neo-realismo," in *Film* (Rome), 5

June 1943, was a discussion of Renoir, Carné, and Duvivier. Don Ranvaud notes at least three earlier occurrences of the term: Ettore Margadonna, "Il realismo nel cinema europeo," *Comoedia*, 15 May 1932 (re NANOOK, GRASS, THE GENERAL LINE, TABU, et al.); A Bocelli in *Nuova Antologia*, 1931, quoted by G. P. Brunetta, *Storia del Cinema Italiano*, (Riuniti, 1979), 446 (re recent writers); and Umberto Barbaro, in the preface to Italian edition of Pudovkin's *The Cinematic Subject*, 1932. ["A Critical Trajectory I," in Ranvaud, ed., *Roberto Rossellini*, BFI-Dossier 8 (1981): 39.]

At *Cinema*, a magazine nominally edited by Mussolini's son Vittorio, Giuseppe De Santis, Mario Alicata, Carlo Lizzani, Gianni Puccini, Massimo Mida, and Cesare Zavattini were among the Communist contributors. De Santis and Alicata, in essaying on the realism of Verga and French cinema, called in 1941 for a "revolutionary art inspired by the sufferings and hopes of humanity." But both men were posing as Fascists ("They were more Fascist than I was," said Vittorio Mussolini), such language was typical of the rhetoric of the regime, which routinely presented itself as "revolutionary," and thus their call would not have been understood as un-Fascist, let alone as anti-Fascist. [De Santis and Alicata quoted in Pietro Ingrao, "Luchino Visconti: L'antifascismo e il cinema," *Rinascita* 13 (1976); quoted in Mira Liehm, *Passion and Defiance: Film in Italy from 1942 to the Present* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 327, n. 32. Vittorio Mussolini to Tag Gallagher, June 1987.]

2. Pio Baldelli, *Roberto Rossellini* (Rome: Samonà e Savelli, 1972).
3. Lino Micciché, "Per una verifica del neorealismo," in Micciché, ed., *Il neorealismo cinematografico italiano* (Venice: Marsilio Editori, 2nd ed. 1978), 15, 27. Elio Vittorini, "Una nuova cultura," *Politecnico*, 29 Sept. 1945.
4. Guido Aristarco did use the term in *Cronache* (Bologna), 29 Dec. 1945—four months after ROMA CITTÀ APERTA's release—but, still, not for Italian cinema: "In France, neo-realism (Renoir, Carné, Duvivier) arose not from the conscious will of the critics but because there were poets with precise aspirations."
5. Luigi Chiarini also asserts that the term originated "beyond the Alps." "Discorso sul neorealismo," *Bianco e Nero* (July 1951).
6. "Le basi filosofiche del neorealismo cinematografico italiano," *Bianco e Nero* (June 1948). Translated in David Overbey, *Springtime in Italy: A Reader on Neo-realism* (London: Talisman, 1978), 115–22. The films Morlion refers to are ROMA CITTÀ APERTA, PAISAN, UN GIORNO NELLA VITA [Blasetti 1946], 4 PASSI FRA LE NUVOLE [Blasetti 1942], SCIUSCIÀ, LA PORTA DEL CIELO [De Sica 1943–46], VIVERE IN PACE, L'ONOREVOLE ANGELINA [Zampa 1947], and the final sequences of IL SOLE SORGE ANCORA.
7. Rossellini: "From 1947 the political struggle in Italy developed in forms extremely violent and rigid, and consequently each and every work, even every attitude or line was watched for its possible and probably political significance. . . . A large number of taboos emerged and discussion was minimalized, restricted, and dried up. A tendency was born to make 'escapist' films. . . . In

this state of things neo-realism is dead." ["Il neorealismo è morto ucciso dalla politica, dai tabù e dalle mode," *Il Messaggero*, 29 July 1960, 8. Reprinted in Rossellini, *Il mio metodo: Scritti e interviste*, ed. Adriano Aprà (Venice: Marsilio, 1987), 229–30.]

8. Just as the tendency to concretize neo-realism into workingclass realism has led to its being totally misunderstood in most American film textbooks, so too the tendency to concretize the phenomenological *politique des auteurs* into literary criticism has led to its being misunderstood by its critics.
9. Strange to say, Bazin and Ayfre generally failed to recognize the difference between film making and film experiencing. That is, in their anxiety to express their novel sensations, they imputed to Rossellini and his camera (and to De Sica and his camera) vis-à-vis the world an operation identical to that of their eyes vis-à-vis the movie screen. Neo-realist filmmakers, they declared, were not manipulating or analyzing reality, were not privileging one thing they saw (e.g., their movie's chief character) over anything else they saw (e.g., a lamp pole, a passing truck, a chair). Said Bazin of LADRI DI BICICLETTE: "No more actors, no more story, no more sets, in other words, ultimately in the perfect aesthetic illusion of reality: no more cinema."

In actuality, only one episode of one Italian film—"The Po" in PAISAN—is neo-realist in the sense of being totally improvised by non-actors recreating events that actually happened to them. ROMA CITTÀ APERTA, contrary to legend, was, except for Magnani's death scene, shot from a thoroughly dialogued script, mostly in a studio, and with professional actors and bankable stars. And LADRI DI BICICLETTE, far from looking at reality just as it is, turns everything into theatre. Unlike "The Po," it was not improvised but thoroughly scripted and thoroughly directed, with De Sica acting out all the parts. It is honest neither in its photographing of Rome (which is made to look gray, depressed, and ugly by eliminating trees or other beautiful aspects from locations shown, and by exposing for sunlight while filming in shadow) nor in its depiction of the Roman people (who despite Fascism, war, occupation, and poverty never lost their natural buoyancy and animation—until De Sica set about inducing a zombie-like comportment into his players and eliminating any emotion not sad, angry or indifferent). It creates a Rome existent neither geographically (cuts connect widely separate locales as though they were proximate) nor socially (the Party would have lent the man a bicycle) nor emotionally (totally flat and gray). We may accept LADRI DI BICICLETTE as poetry, but not as any kind of realism—unless surrealism. (Bazin, "Voleur de bicyclette," *Esprit* (November 1949); reprinted in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma* 4 59; trans. Gray, vol. 2, 60.)

10. The question here concerns *philosophic* influences. Cinematically, the dominant influence is perhaps King Vidor, in whose films a similar mixture of documentary and melodrama, stars and politics also exists. And while Vidor did not share Rossellini's obsessions with history and religion, as a Christian Scientist he was intent on the need for each individual to find his or her separate truth. Rossellini himself cited Blasetti and

- Pagnol as neo-realism before the fact, and acknowledged the influence of Renoir's *LA GRAND ILLUSION* on his *UN PILOTA RITORNA* (1942) and *L'UOMO DALLA CROCE* [1943].
11. Croce has been ignored, quite simply, because he symbolized traditions of the past, because he was written off by the left as an unconscious collaborator with Fascism, and because his thought was not widely known outside of Italy.
 12. It was from Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), the only other Italian philosopher of note since the Renaissance, that Croce adapted this notion of *ricorso* (rerunning; renewal).
 13. Remarks to students at Yale, c. 1974.
 14. Rossellini, "L'intelligenza del presente," in *La trilogia della guerra* (Bologna: Cappelli editore, 1972), 13.
 15. Interview, in Gian Luigi Rondi, *Il cinema dei maestri* (Milan: Rusconi, 1980), 24.
 16. In claiming he was simply showing things as they are without trying to demonstrate a thesis of his own, Rossellini constantly inspired misunderstanding. "It happens all the time," he said in a rare clarification, "that in public debates [when I state that I show rather than demonstrate my own ideas] someone tells me, 'But you do make choices just the same.' 'No,' I reply, 'I content myself with amassing the greatest possible number of facts.' 'But that's already a choice!' 'Okay. But recognize just the same that between a choice which structures, which pleads, which diverts direction, and a choice which offers choice, there exists an abyss. They are two radically different sorts of operation.'" [Rossellini, "De l'ignorance," an essay written in 1977, in *Fragments d'une autobiographie* (Paris: Ramsay, 1987), 46.]
In actuality, Rossellini was adamantly opposed to non-subjective filmmaking. Rouch and the Maysles he condemned as voyeurs for their failure to "take a position. . . : Ultimately one gives a judgement: it's with oneself one meets and not with another. . . . There's a grave danger in going toward depersonalization, involuntary or not. If one goes far enough, depersonalization becomes enormous, becomes alienation. One finds oneself before a wall." Alienation, for Rossellini, was the great sickness of modern art, epitomized by Antonioni. [Rossellini's debate with Rouch, Maysles, et al. was excerpted in *Artsept* (April 1963): 101–04, and in *Objectif 63* (Canada) (August 1963): 35–38. The two versions are integrated in Rossellini, *Il mio metodo*, 280–87.]
 17. Benedetto Croce, "Theory of Aesthetic" in *Aesthetic* (English translation of revised edition) (New York: Noonday Press, 1922): 26–27. I have translated Croce's "ad narrandum, non ad demonstrandum" out of his Latin in order to emphasize the kinship with Rossellini.
 18. Rossellini, Unpublished speech delivered before Parisian Jesuits, c. 1968, in the possession of Enrico Fulchignoni.
 19. Rossellini, "Dix ans de cinéma: I," *Cahiers du Cinema* 50 (August 1955).
 20. In Tag Gallagher and John Hughes, "Where Are We Going?" *Changes* (New York) (April 1974).
 21. Emilio Lonero, "Un messaggio di fede, di speranza, di amore," *Rivista del Cinematografo* (June 1954): 16. Reprinted in Roberto Rossellini, *Il mio metodo*, 104.
 22. Mario Verdone, "Colloquio sul neorealismo," *Bianco e Nero* (February 1952).
 23. *Arts* (16 June 1954).
 24. From this perspective, it is clear why Rossellini, in making films like *L'AMORE*, *STROMBOLI*, and *VOYAGE IN ITALY* after *ROMA CITTÀ APERTA* and *PAISAN*, felt he was continuing the line of inquiry he had commenced, whereas the Left, from its perspective, felt him guilty of "involution" and betrayal.
 25. Typically, as the primacy of theory was being abandoned in Italy, American academics, convinced they were at last erecting against bourgeois frigidity, bestowed their first embraces of passion.
 26. Speech before Parisian Jesuits.
 27. In the early 70s, the Italian Communist Party came around to Rossellini's side. It rejected its Stalinist past and most of its old positivist tendencies, and adopted instead the views of Gramsci, for whom Croce was "the greatest thinker in Europe today." Like Croce, Gramsci believed that the future is shaped by will power and ideas, not by mechanical historical laws; that revolution requires diffusion of ideas and culture; and that man's goal is "the creation of a society in which there could be the greatest amount of freedom with the minimum of coercion." Cf., Luigi Barzini, *From Caesar to the Mafia* (New York: Bantam, 1972), 137.
 28. My intention is to refute false notions of neo-realism's origins and nature, and to show that an ideological neo-realism is a contradiction in terms. It is not my intention to designate Rossellini's as the ideal neo-realism. "There were as many neo-realisms as there were neo-realists," writes Micciché, adding (correctly, I believe) that therefore neo-realism never existed as a definable phenomenon.
Yet it is possible to say what neo-realism is *not*. Henri Langlois, bemoaning the classification of so "classical" a piece as Visconti's *OSSESSIONE* [1942] as neo-realist, lamented the "tendency to confuse neo-realism with the decor of Italian life and to imagine that all films situating their action there belong to the same school—thus confusing the habit and the monk." And it seems to me that the most *useful* denotation is to limit neo-realism to films produced during the period of postwar unity and to go on from there in search of further commonality. Certainly there is continuity, stylistic and political, between De Sica's *LADRI DI BICICLETTA* and *UMBERTO D* (1952) and *IL TETTO* (1956). And it may seem arbitrary to categorize the two later films as *not* "neo-realist" solely because of their production dates (post May 1948). But if one calls them "neo-realist" anyway, the question recurs: what does the term mean? Bazin proclaimed *LADRI DI BICICLETTA* as "the purest expression of neo-realism . . . , the zero point, the ideal center around which gravitate, each in its own orbit, the works of the other great directors." But beyond some vague Bazinian aesthetic (to which, he felt, Welles's *MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS* also belonged), it is impossible to see any but the most casual common ground between De Sica's picture and any of Rossellini's (cf. note 9, above). If *LADRI DI BICICLETTA* epitomizes "neo-realism" stylistically or politically, Rossellini is never neo-realist in either sense. (Micciché, op. cit., 27. Henri Langlois, *Trois cents ans de cinéma: écrits* [Texts réunis et présentés par Jean Narboni. Paris: CdC, Cinefranc, Fondation

- Européenne des Métiers de l'Image et du Son, 1986], 306–07. Andre Bazin, "De Sica metteur en scène" [*Vittorio De Sica* (Parma: Guanda, 1952.)] Reprinted in French in *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma*, vol. 4, 72.)
29. Remarks to students at Yale University, c. 1974.
 30. Quoted in Giuseppe Nava, "Osservare sapere capire: l'impegno di Rossellini dal cinema alla televisione," in *Rossellini: Pascal per la televisione* (RAI Press Office, 1972), 15.
 31. Rossellini was fond of attributing the notion that true education consists of direct perception, whereas theory merely intrudes and befuddles, to Commenius, seventeenth-century Moravian philosopher he rediscovered. Commenius provided a theoretical justification for the program of visual education that Rossellini wished to promote via film and TV. But, in fact, much of Commenius is contained in Croce, and thus Rossellini was rediscovering notions that had been ingrained into him in childhood. Since imagination precedes thought and is necessary to it, said Croce, the mind's artistic, image-forming activity is prior to its logical, concept-forming activity: man is an artist as soon as he images, and long before he reasons. (The neo-realist bias that *real* reality

can be discovered by bypassing conceptualization is doubtless rooted in these ideas, even though Croce insists that intuition must be conscious, so that knowledge is knowledge of ideas rather than directly of things.)

In Croce, too, lie the roots of Rossellini's infamous penchant for carelessness and for having others direct portions of his films. "[Rossellini] was of the opinion," said Carlo Lizzani, "that the framing could be done this way or that, but if one shot enough and if the idea were clear, the material would be good in any case." For Croce, aesthetic activity lies in the effort to conceive the perfect image to express a subject: a form of intuition involving no mystic insight, but perfect sight, complete perception, adequate imagination. Art, however, is not the externalization (the manufacturing) of this ideal but rather its conception. Externalization is mere mechanical technique and craft skill. Beauty lies in imagining a thing's essence. The difference between us and Shakespeare is not one of craft but of imagination. In *THE AGE OF THE MEDICI*, Rossellini has Alberti expound a similar theory. (Lizzani, Faldini & Fofi, *L'avventurosa storia* I:111.)